



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Report to the Administrator**  
Division of Children and Family Services

# Independent Living For Children In Out-Of-Home Care

Independent Living  
Advisory Committee



Wisconsin Department of  
Health and Family Services  
Division of Children and Family Services  
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**The partners in child welfare must emphasize  
the development and achievement of positive outcomes  
for both the individual child and the system in general.**



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# Introduction

Established by the Division of Children and Family Services in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work, the Independent Living Advisory Committee convened regularly from June 1999 through June 2000. The purpose of the committee was to advise the Division of Children and Family Services on the Division's programs and policies on independent living services for youth exiting care at age 18. The committee consisted of foster parents, policy makers, service providers and professionals from the various systems that impact the lives of youth making the transition to self-sufficiency. The role of the committee was to determine the needs of these youth and to provide recommendations as to how the current child welfare system can achieve measurable improvements.

The challenges facing these youth are many and varied. While national data chronicling the needs of this population are limited, Wisconsin is in the unique position of having timely and comprehensive data on the non-delinquent youth exiting care in our state. The Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood (FYTA) Study, conducted by Mark Courtney, Ph.D., and Irving Piliavin, Ph.D., of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work, has received national recognition and served as a model for other states seeking to conduct evaluations of their independent living programs. The study was conducted in collaboration with the Division of Children and Family Services.



The study indicates that these youth are vulnerable to physical and sexual victimization, unemployment and underemployment, homelessness, incarceration and public assistance utilization in higher numbers than youth in this age cohort who had not been placed in the child welfare system. These are community problems that have a high cost both in financial loss and lost human potential.

Given its custodial and general parental responsibility to these youth, the Division of Children and Family Services must be devoted to assuring the provision of the services and supports necessary to maximize their potential for self-sufficiency during this critical period of transition to adulthood. This must be done through a partnership with the communities in which these youth live. This document represents the committee's recommendation that the Division evaluate the effectiveness of services to youth and strive for the constant improvement of these services.

The committee acknowledges and embraces the increased responsibility of the child welfare system and the community for youth residing in out-of-home care. Upon removal of these children from their parents, the community assumes a shared responsibility to provide for their care and maintenance. Since these youth have been removed from their parents, the community has a responsibility to assure their healthy development, spanning from the moment they enter the system to the time at which they can function in a self-sufficient manner in the community.



The consequences for these youth and the community are staggering when this responsibility is unmet. According to the Foster Youth Transitions to Adulthood (FYTA) Study, at 12 to 18 months after exiting care, 12 percent of these youth had been homeless (i.e., living on the street or in a shelter); 32 percent relied on some form of public assistance for at least a portion of their income; 27 percent of males and 10 percent of females had been incarcerated at least once during this period; and 25 percent of males and 15 percent of females reported serious physical victimization, including being "beat up" and other significant violent acts. Given the unique vulnerabilities of this population and the detrimental consequences to their physical, psychological and emotional well being when they leave care without adequate preparation, it is evident that the community must renew its commitment to the population of youth in out-of-home care.

Governor Thompson and the Department of Health and Family Services are concerned about improving the outcomes for these youth. This concern has also been mirrored at the federal level. The recent passage of the John Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 serves to double federal spending for independent living preparation services for youth in out-of-home care and to increase the flexibility allowed for the use of

these funds. The Act also allows for the provision of a variety of services, including room and board and, at state option, allows for Medical Assistance (MA) coverage of these youth to age 21. Given the prospect for increased allocations for Wisconsin under this legislation and the knowledge we now have as a result of the University of Wisconsin study, this is a timely opportunity for our state to improve its current independent living preparation services. The recommendations contained in this report reflect what the committee has deemed to be the most appropriate, efficient and effective means to meet this challenge.

It is critical that the specific recommendations be considered within the general context of the child welfare system and the out-of-home program. Efforts to achieve excellence in independent living preparation are dependent upon the quality of the overall child welfare system. For example, the best way to reduce the need for independent living preparation is to reduce the number of children in the out-of-home care program and to reduce the length of stay of children who are placed. This requires the development of effective and efficient services to assure that children can be maintained safely in their own homes and to achieve permanence in a more timely fashion for all children who are placed.

In addition, the committee believes that all children in the child welfare system must have available to them the services and case management coordination necessary to assure effective and efficient involvement with the system, including the utilization of multi-disciplinary coordinated service teams. The partners in child welfare must emphasize the development and achievement of positive outcomes for both the individual child and the system in general. While the recommendations in this report are to the Division of Children and Family Services, it is critical that the Division works with its multiple partners to achieve the outcomes intended in the recommendations.

In terms of the youth who are specifically served with federal independent living funds, the Division should emphasize consideration of the following groups in the priority order listed:

1. Youth who exited care on their 18th birthday and who were in out-of-home care for at least two years prior to their exit.
2. Youth who exited care between their 17th and 18th birthdays and who were in care for at least two years prior to their exit.
3. Youth who exited care after the age of 17 and who were in care for at least one year.
4. All other youth who exit the out-of-home care system.

(Note: For the purposes of this report, the term “youth,” unless otherwise specified, means those youth who exit out-of-home care because they have attained the age of 18.)



# Considerations

In developing its recommendations for independent living preparation services for youth, the committee combined current research findings with their professional expertise. A series of community “listening sessions” were held throughout the state to supplement this information with feedback from the community on the needs of these youth in various regions, both rural and urban, of Wisconsin.

## CONSIDERATIONS:

- Life-Long Learning and Development
- The Important Role of Caregivers
- Training Must Be Experiential
- Training Must Be Individualized
- Family Relationships Must Be Emphasized
- Supportive Relationships
- Multi-System Participation
- Community Recognition, Support and Acceptance



# Guiding Principles

In formulating its recommendations, the committee embraced several principles. These reflect the values that the committee deems essential to the creation of successful independent living preparation services. They are:

The child welfare system and all of its component parts must be driven by agreed-upon and established positive **outcomes and result-oriented management**.

It must be recognized that strong families are essential to the healthy development of children. Child welfare must utilize **family-oriented services** to acknowledge the importance of the family and to create positive and healthy relationships between youth and their families. In addition, there must be a **focus on empowerment** to create a context in which youth are encouraged and allowed to advocate for themselves at both the policy level and in their daily lives. In this regard, independent

living preparation services must seek to build on the individual **strengths and assets of youth**. While these youth face unique challenges and vulnerabilities, it is important that independent living policy be created to acknowledge and foster their resiliency.

Successful child welfare and independent living policy must be based on **sound research, guided by evaluation and focused on outcomes**.

Independent living preparation and policies must be based on what we know about the needs of youth and the models that have been found to be successful at meeting those needs. A successful transition to independence also hinges on the **collaboration of systems** (e.g., educational, health, mental health, housing and employment) to create a supportive network for youth as they move from the child welfare system to self-sufficiency.

The child welfare system must foster a sense of positive identity in children and strive to provide them with opportunities to maintain and strengthen connections with their racial/ethnic/cultural community. To accomplish this, the child welfare system must be culturally competent and develop a work force that has the knowledge and skills to work successfully with families of all cultures, ethnicities and races.

Uniform standards and other forms of state leadership must be created to assure that youth throughout the state have equal access to these services regardless of where they live. Further, in creating these standards in partnership with counties, tribes and service providers, the Division must commit to assisting counties and tribes in securing resources, guidance and support.

## Vision

The vision of the Independent Living Advisory Committee is that the greater Wisconsin community must commit to assuring that all youth in care in our state are able to access the necessary services, supports and opportunities during their out-of-home care experience to maximize their ability to become self-sufficient, healthy adults. The Wisconsin community must also be committed to fostering the healthy development of youth throughout their transition to adulthood, including the continued provision of needed services and supports upon their exit from care.



# Mission

The mission of the Independent Living Advisory Committee, reflecting its belief that these youth are “our children,” is to assure that all youth exiting the out-of-home care system in Wisconsin will make the transition to adulthood as self-sufficient, productive and healthy individuals.

# Goals

Wisconsin will see higher rates of adequate shelter, educational attainment, employment and employment stability, healthy relationships and financial independence for children who leave out-of-home care at age 18. We will see lower rates of incarceration, public assistance utilization and physical and sexual victimization for these youth.

## IN ADDITION:

- All youth will receive age- and development-appropriate developmental skills and independent living preparation services designed to assure their capacity to exercise judgment commensurate with their age, abilities, strengths and needs. The committee recognizes that some youth in care have developmental disabilities, are teen parents or are otherwise limited in the immediate achievement of certain goals. As such, these goals are established for the system rather than for specific children.
- All youth aged 16 or older exiting out-of-home care will leave care with a minimum of the following:
  - Driver's license or preparation for obtaining a driver's license or other access to transportation to school, employment and other critical activities
  - High school diploma or GED or enrollment in an educational program designed to result in a high school diploma or GED
  - Work experience, job readiness skills and/or job placement
  - Access to their birth certificates, social security cards, medical records and other critical documents
  - Access to funds adequate to support him/herself for a period of three months following exit from care
  - Access to and knowledge of local resources, including but not limited to food pantries, human service agencies, health clinics and mental health facilities
  - A safe and stable living environment



# Recommendations

In order for Wisconsin to successfully prepare youth for self-sufficiency, we must alter our approach to independent living preparation to reflect the fact that children in care are the shared responsibility of the community. Given this consideration, the committee has identified the following as subgoals for our recommendations to achieve that change.

- A. Excellence in Child Welfare Services
- B. Normalize Life Skills Development Within the Child Welfare System
- C. Recognition of Older Adolescence as a Crucial Transitional Phase Toward Self-Sufficiency
- D. Creating Bridges to Self-Sufficiency for 18 to 21 Year Olds
- E. Recognizing the Role of All Social Institutions in Helping Youth Achieve Self-Sufficiency

## A. EXCELLENCE IN CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

The committee recognizes that effective independent living preparation must take place within an effective child welfare system. The purpose of this report is to identify how greater assistance can be provided to children who age out of care. Given the limited funds available for this purpose, it is critical that the number of children to be served be reduced as much as possible. This entails fewer children coming into out-of-home care and a reduction in the length of stay for children who do come into care.

In making independent living preparation services an integral part of the child welfare system, it is necessary to make alterations within that system to best meet the challenges facing these youth. The committee recommends that the DCFS, with its partners, assures that its strategic plan for child welfare services is based on excellence, is comprehensive and focused on outcomes.

### **RECOMMENDATION A 1**

The child welfare system needs to intensify its efforts to recruit and retain quality foster parents and other caregivers and child welfare services staff that are able to meet the unique needs of adolescents in care.



## **RECOMMENDATION A 2**

The Division needs to assure quality improvement in the child welfare system through the provision or arrangement of technical assistance and support to assist county and tribal agencies in assuring the quality of their out-of-home care resources.

## **RECOMMENDATION A 3**

Child welfare services need to be process-oriented and outcome-focused through the establishment of goals, the evaluation of achievement of those goals, data collection and the use of research.



## **RECOMMENDATION A 4**

Child welfare agencies must recognize and strengthen the unique bonds that exist between children and their families through continual efforts to increase the involvement of these families in the provision of services to youth in out-of-home care.

## **RECOMMENDATION A 5**

The child welfare system must recognize and respond to the important role of culture in the lives of children and continually strive toward increased cultural competency in its provision of services to culturally, ethnically and racially diverse populations of children and families. This effort must also include an analysis of the causes of minority child overrepresentation in the out-of-home care system.



## **RECOMMENDATION A 6**

The child welfare system, in association with other service agencies and systems, must strive to achieve timely physical, psychological and emotional permanency for all youth in out-of-home care.

## **B. NORMALIZE LIFE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM**

Throughout childhood, youth acquire a multitude of skills (such as problem solving, interpersonal communication, conflict resolution, consequential thinking and coping skills) which are vital for success in adulthood. All youth, regardless of whether raised within their family or in out-of-home care, must master these skills in order to be successful.

Current programs and policies serve to differentiate independent living preparation from other components of the out-of-home care experience, treating it as a separate, distinct entity as opposed to an integral function of the out-of-home care system. This current approach to independent living fails to address the importance of the life-long acquisition of skills necessary to be successful in adulthood.

### **RECOMMENDATION B 1**

The child welfare system should better utilize foster parents, other caregivers and social workers as essential resources and primary trainers of independent living preparation training for all children and youth in out-of-home care.

### **RECOMMENDATION B 2**

Independent living preparation services should be designed to meet the individualized needs of youth in care, regardless of their age.

## **C. RECOGNITION OF OLDER ADOLESCENCE AS A CRUCIAL TRANSITIONAL PHASE TOWARD SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

While independent living preparation is a normal developmental process that occurs throughout life, the committee recognizes that older adolescence serves as a crucial transitional phase in the movement toward self-sufficiency. While the child welfare system has a responsibility to provide an appropriate foundation for independent living training for all youth in care, it has a heightened responsibility for youth who will reside in care until the age of majority.

While the majority of youth interviewed for the FYTA Study indicated that they had received some form of independent living preparation training prior to exiting care, their feeling of being unprepared in several key areas raises serious questions as to how well we are preparing these



youth for life after out-of-home care. Particularly troubling were findings that approximately one-third of the youth felt unprepared to secure housing, approximately one-third reported feeling unprepared to manage money and about one-quarter indicated that they felt unprepared in their knowledge of available resources in the community.

Given the severity of the consequences when we fail to meet our responsibility to prepare youth for independence, increased services, supports and training must be provided to youth prior to their release from our care. To help us better meet this responsibility, the committee offers the following recommendations.

#### **RECOMMENDATION C 1**

The child welfare system must foster the formation and continuity of relationships with caregivers and peers available to youth in out-of-home care.

#### **RECOMMENDATION C 2**

Wisconsin communities must develop and support transitional living arrangements for youth in care, including supervised living and transitional living options. The Division must assure the greatest regulatory flexibility possible to allow a variety of transitional options while maintaining its responsibility to protect the health, safety and welfare of children.

#### **RECOMMENDATION C 3**

The child welfare system must increase its efforts to promote the active participation and involvement of older adolescents exiting care in the decisions affecting their lives.

#### **RECOMMENDATION C 4**

The Division and its partners must promote the dissemination of resource information to youth exiting out-of-home care and to service providers working with older adolescents in care.

#### **D. CREATING BRIDGES TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY FOR 18 TO 21 YEAR OLDS**

While youth who were not raised in out-of-home care often rely on their families and other relationships for assistance and support during this phase of transition, youth exiting the out-of-home system oftentimes do not have such support available to them. While complete self-sufficiency at the age of 18 is an unrealistic expectation for youth raised even under the best of circumstances, it is particularly unrealistic for youth exiting the foster care system.

##### **RECOMMENDATION D 1**

The child welfare system must extend assistance and support to foster youth to include youth aged 18 to 21, including aftercare services and continued involvement by foster parents and other caregivers.

##### **RECOMMENDATION D 2**

The child welfare system must create avenues, such as outreach services, for youth to return to the child welfare system for assistance after their formal discharge from care.

#### **E. RECOGNIZING THE ROLE OF ALL SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN HELPING YOUTH ACHIEVE SELF-SUFFICIENCY**

Youth leaving care and youth who have never been in care utilize community resources to meet a variety of their needs. In addition to these normative needs of adolescence, youth in out-of-home care may have unique physical, psychological and emotional needs resulting from their histories of abuse and neglect. These needs are further heightened by the numerous disruptions that occur in a youth's life once he or she enters care. Although the need for these services does not disappear once youth age out of the out-of-home care system, their ability to access these services becomes more difficult once they have been discharged.

##### **RECOMMENDATION E 1**

The child welfare system must strive to create a firmer linkage and easier transition between the child and adult services system.



### **RECOMMENDATION E2**

The child welfare system must increase its efforts to utilize the community in its provision of support to older adolescents exiting care, to promote the notion that youth in out-of-home care are members of the community and to assure that youth in out-of-home care are included in community activities and organizations.

### **RECOMMENDATION E3**

The child welfare system must promote the formation of multi-disciplinary teams to provide services to youth leaving care and should increase its efforts to promote effective and efficient communication among the multiple systems working with youth.

### **RECOMMENDATION E4**

The child welfare system must work closely with child support enforcement agencies to assure the collection and allocation of child support payments for youth in care, including the establishment of savings accounts for youth in care and increased efforts to determine paternity.



### **RECOMMENDATION E5**

The child welfare system must work closely with the public school, vocational-technical college and university systems to assure that the educational needs of and access to educational opportunities for youth exiting out-of-home care are reflected in program and funding options.

### **RECOMMENDATION E6**

The child welfare system must collaborate with public health and Medicaid agencies and officials to assure that youth exiting out-of-home care have access to affordable health care.

### **RECOMMENDATION E7**

The child welfare system must collaborate with the public and private employment sector to maximize job training and employment opportunities for youth exiting out-of-home care.

# F. Administrative Recommendations

## **RECOMMENDATION F 1**

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The Division must establish a work group comprised of state, county and tribal staff and representatives of the Division of Juvenile Corrections to develop a formula for the distribution of funds available for independent living preparation services. The formula should be based on best practice considerations and should utilize such data as caseloads and workloads, the number of youth over a certain age in out-of-home care and the number of youth who leave care after age 17. The formula and its implementation must consider each agency's need and must, when appropriate, be multi-agency based in order to maximize existing funds.

## **RECOMMENDATION F 2**

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In order to fulfill its role as articulated in the preceding recommendations, the Division must have an adequate infrastructure and supports. In order to provide much needed technical assistance, consultation and evaluation services, the Division should seek authority for one additional FTE dedicated to the assurance of accountability and the achievement of positive results. The position should also be assigned to assure successful implementation of independent living preparation services and the recommendations included in this report.